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SUBJECT: SERBIA'S SANDZAK -- DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS DROP AS
LOCAL BOSNIAK POLITICAL MACHINE TEAMS UP WITH GOS

¶1. SUMMARY: A recent visit to the largest city in Serbia's Sandzak area, the home of Serbia's largest Bosniak minority community, shows the local political machine of Sulejman Ugljanin, a close ally of PM Kostunica, firmly in control. A murky election-day shoot-out during a Belgrade-backed recall of the local assembly several months ago has helped Ugljanin consolidate his control there. The result is a serious set back for national democratic light and ICTY point man Rasim Ljajic that has prompted the local moderate Mufti to take on a more overt political role. End Summary

¶2. Novi Pazar, the central city of Serbia's Sandzak region, is the most important city for Serbia's Bosniak community, as a historic trading post on the road linking Bosnia and Kosovo. Sulejman Ugljanin, an aging former boxer, keeps a firm hand on the city's local political machine controlled by his Party of Democratic Action (SDA). Ugljanin is not encumbered by political principle; his sole motivation is to retain power and prevent any meaningful opposition to his rule. Once a strong proponent of autonomy for the Sandzak and a supporter of the DS, Ugljanin left the DS caucus in 2004 and joined Kostunica's coalition; an amazing about face considering the PM's anti-autonomy stance. For Ugljanin, the chance of enlisting the government in his fight against his former deputy and erstwhile rival Ljajic was too much to resist. For Kostunica, it was an equally easy decision that allowed him to jettison the troublesome Nebojsa Covic from his coalition. Kostunica offered Ugljanin key deputy posts in the Ministry of Capital Investments (roads and infrastructure are critical to the mountainous Sandzak) and the Ministry of Local Governance (critical for interpreting national law on local governance), literally pulling the rug from under Ljajic's feet.

Democratic Hopes Fall Prey to New Coalition

¶3. In the 2004 Novi Pazar elections, Ugljanin was dealt a heavy blow when Ljajic and his Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) were able to get control of the city assembly. Once assured of Belgrade's support, Ugljanin struck back, orchestrating an outrageous recall vote of the assembly and intimidating Ljajic's allies, including the local Mufti, moderate Muamar Zukorlic. Shortly before the recall vote, Zukorlic was stopped by police on his way back to Novi Pazar after flying back from one of his periodic religious visits to Iran. Even though he had not been stopped in the airport upon arrival, police stopped Zukorlic on the road, searching his vehicle and luggage. The Mufti refused to allow his personal bags to be searched. Rumors circulated in the press afterwards suggesting that Zukorlic was carrying significant funds from Tehran that were to be used for political purposes. Embassy sources confirmed Zukorlic's moderate political leanings, notwithstanding his periodic trips to Iran and suggested that the incident had

been arranged by Ugljanin's machine to warn ukorlic
aainst any involvement in the recall voe.

¶4. Local assembly elections in Novi Pazar o September 10, 2006, pitted Ugljanin's ocal city machine against Rasim Ljajic's SDP. There were scuffles and incidents during the course of the day, culminating in the shooting death of a List for Sandzak candidate (party headed by Ugljanin) for councilperson, Ruzdija Durovic, outside a polling station. Two people from Ljajic's SDP were arrested for the shooting, after which Ljajic pulled his people out of all polling stations. As a result Ugljanin won control of the assembly, gaining 27 of 47 seats, while Ljajic's SDP, in a coalition with DS and G17 Plus, won 12 seats. Following the shooting Ljajic stated that his party would not take part in future elections without OSCE observers present, and declared a boycott of the assembly election. Ljajic's boycott meant the withdrawal of his party from the assembly. Of the 12 seats, the SDP gave two seats to the DS, two to the Green Party, and one to G17 Plus.

Ljajic Fights to Save His Political Life

¶5. The events in Sandzak considerably complicate Ljajic's efforts in Novi Pazar and undermine his political standing not only among Sandzakis but at the national level as well. However, Ljajic is fighting to remain on the political scene. His initial efforts to start a minority coalition list for the next parliamentary elections have been overtaken by a generous offer from the Democratic Party (DS) for him to run on the DS list. The deal offers him campaign funds, a promised ministerial post and several vice ministerial posts. The catch is that it will be the DS, and not the SDA, that controls the party seats, constricting Ljajic's ability to maneuver on issues that

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directly affect his constituency. It is obvious that Ljajic recently lost some influence as a result of the Novi Pazar elections. However, he still has opportunities to overcome this setback.

Conflict with the Islamic Community

¶6. Ugljanin, encouraged by his electoral victory, has launched public and legal attacks against Mufti Zukorlic. Esad Dzudzevic, MP in the Serbian Parliament and Ugljanin's associate, is encouraging Bosniaks to sever ties with the SIC as long as Zukorlic remains the head. Zukorlic claims that Ugljanin won unfairly and now wants to co-opt the SIC, starting with Zukorlic's ouster. One of the main points of contention recently has been control of the Islamic Faculty building, located across the street from the city hall in Novi Pazar. This building was recently vandalized, and the Mufti believes it is just one part of the ongoing attacks against the Islamic Community. Ugljanin claims that the problem with the Faculty was the result of a question of ownership. He said he knew nothing of the issue until the Mufti organized a protest. Ugljanin considers this an issue to be solved by the courts, and says that he will not take sides. He admitted, however, his anger with the Islamic Community for making political statements (at local mosques) during the pre-election silence period. The Mufti on the other hand claims that he had a sort of "gentlemen's agreement" with the current owner of the building that they would share the space temporarily until ownership is resolved. The Mufti believes that Ugljanin is behind the vandalism as well as the building dispute.

The Referendum in Sandzak

¶7. Ugljanin's close relationship with Kostunica and the ongoing fight in the Sandzak community also presented a

confusing picture of Bosniak support for the Constitution in the referendum held in late October. Ugljanin was an ardent supporter of the constitution, claiming excellent relations between the Serbs and the Bosniaks in the region. He admitted that the Constitution was not perfect, but argued that the three major demands of his List for Sandzak party, List for Sandzak, were accepted, to include "balanced and proportional regional development." He was willing to compromise on other points because he believed that this was important to the region.

18. The opposition took a different position. In mid October the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Sandzak, (also referred to as the Supreme Council, which provides Islamic spiritual leadership), along with five Bosniak parties, signed a declaration stating that the new constitution in Serbia ignores the demands of the Bosniaks and marginalizes them further. In this declaration they ask that President Tadic and Prime Minister Kostunica begin a dialogue about resolving the status of the Sandzak and of Bosniaks living in Serbia. This document was signed by Mufti Zukorlic, Ljajic (representing the SDP), Dzemail Suljevic (People's Movement of Sandzak), Fevzija Muric (Stranka za Sandzak), Tarik Imamovic (Sandzak Alternative), and Zehniya Bulic (Sandzak Democratic Union). Ugljanin's party, List for Sandzak, did not sign.

19. The results of the referendum were overwhelmingly in support of the constitution. But the anomalous results (the Sandzak was listed as the part of Serbia most in support of the Constitution, with over 60 percent of the population coming out in favor -- this in spite of controversy surrounding provisions on minority protections and regional autonomy) and secret monitoring of specific polling stations suggests widespread election day tampering at the Sandzak polling stations. More troubling yet, were reports, following the referendum, of a gun clash in Novi Pazar between a small group of Wahabis -- not a regular feature of the local Islamic community -- and others outside the main mosque.

Lack of Free Press -----

110. Journalists in Novi Pazarsay that they are increasingly prevented from doing their jobs due to the lack of freedom of the press. Generally, they are not allowed to ask questions, but rather only to report on the situation. For example, when the shooting incident occurred in September, journalists who tried to cover the story returned home in fear for their safety.

Comment -----

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111. The Sandzak has significant regional influence as a minority Bosniak area in Serbia that maintains close and sensitive trade links with Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Ugljanin's shenanigans over the last several months, suggest he would go to any lengths in his myopic and driven effort to eliminate the local opposition. Not only is this dangerous for Sandzak -- by lowering democratic standards and encouraging a dangerous mix of Islam and politics -- it is also bad for Rasim Ljajic, one of the more promising democrats on the national scene. We are discussing with our GOTV implementers (NDI, IRI) how we can best support Ljajic's SDP and other parties in his coalition in the likely January parliamentary elections. We will also continue to consider how to use our direct engagement (e.g., Ambassadorial visit, AID efforts) in Novi Pazar and in the Sandzak region more generally, to support democratic standards.

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